

DON'T overdo it

Category: Devarim, Ki Setzei

Should the minimum wage be raised? It's a debate that never gets old.

Minimum Wage

There is a debate that never gets old: whether or not to raise the minimum wage. Those who are for it, obviously feel sorry for the poor worker that needs to support his family. Those who are against the motion feel for the business owner whose profit will be diminished by the increase in his employee's salaries.

With whom does Torah side?

One of the laws laid down in this week's parsha is, "When you enter your friend's vineyard and eat his grapes to your heart's content, you shall not gather them into your basket."

It seems strange that Torah condones entering another's field and eating his produce. In modern law you could get arrested for trespassing alone. The truth is, as Rashi explains, that Torah does not allow trespassing or eating someone else's grapes. This verse applies exclusively to employees.

The meaning of the law is, for example, that Hershey's Chocolate may not tell a worker that he's not allowed to taste the chocolate. The reason is that to tell a guy who, with four out of five of his senses, is engulfed in chocolate, that he can't have any—is simply cruel.

The Protection of the Worker

However, the Torah adds a small note for the employee, "Don't gather them into your basket." You can't expect a lifetime supply of chocolate to take home for your wife and kids. Only the worker himself, during active duty, can enjoy the "grapes."

Still, the Mishna gives puts a limit on that too. Let me paraphrase, "We don't want to teach workers to be pigs." Yes, you may taste some of the fruit but don't overdo

it.

It's not that Torah is worried about the cost to the boss. Rather Torah is concerned about the worker. If people hear that you're a pig they won't want to hire you. Therefore, hold back on product consumption and let people sing your praises.

This reflects the minimum wage debate. Those who claim to be protecting the "poor worker bee" are unknowingly fighting to harm them. If the minimum wage goes up the number of jobs will go down. In the end, hogging the cash is going to leave hundreds of "poor worker bees" without jobs.

But this advice doesn't apply only to the work place. Not to overindulge is good ethics everywhere.

Don't Be A Chazer

On a visit to Israel, an old Chassidic Rebbe from America was asked to describe what kind of Chassidim he had in the US. This was in the early days of Jewish life in the US, when it was difficult to find observant Jews even in Chassidic-style communities. So, he responded with a story:

"A man once came to me asking for a blessing to have a child. I told him that I'd give him my blessing if he agreed to keep the mitzvah of Tefillin. The man agreed. We spoke a while longer and at the end of our conversation I added, 'Perhaps you'd agree to take upon yourself the mitzvah of Shabbat as well.' This time the man replied, 'Rebbe, *zeit nit kein chazer* - don't be a pig!'"

So, you see, restraint can apply to mitzvos too.

On a serious note, it really does apply to holy things. In the Holy Temple the Show Bread was changed every Friday afternoon. The bread that had lain on the Show Table miraculously remained as fresh as the moment it came out of the oven. It would have been a shame to waste it, so the Kohanim on duty at the time would divide the twelve loaves amongst themselves. But the Talmud tells us, "The modest ones would withdraw their hands from it and only the gluttonous would grab [their portion] from it."

To partake of the Show Bread was a great opportunity, a chance Kohanim got

only once a year (each shift served only one week a year). Still, the scrupulous wouldn't take any and those who did take were considered gluttons.

In fact, the previous Rebbe said, "It's okay if one is less scrupulous in the performance of mitzvos that involve physical pleasure."

That means that although it's a mitzvah to eat meat on Shabbat you don't have to finish the whole pot of *cholent*! And although sleeping on Shabbat is encouraged, you don't have to spend all day in bed! As the Rebbe once pointed out, "One should not invest his whole heart and soul in mitzvos that involve physical pleasure. For pleasure is a slippery slope. Mitzvah pleasure is closely followed by plain (permissible) pleasure and that is closely followed by forbidden pleasure."

The Talmud accuses Kohanim who were meticulous in collecting their rightful portion of "*Matnas Kehuna*" (the tithes for the Kohen) of being gluttonous. In fact Abaye, a leading Talmudist, would abstain from accepting any of this tax. Once a year, on the day before Yom Kippur, he would accept his portion, just so it should not be forgotten that he was a Kohen.

G-d's Employees

This law also has a unique aspect that could teach us a powerful lesson.

Sometimes, the Talmud refers to the word "friend" as G-d, so we can translate the command of "When you enter your friend's vineyard..." as G-d's vineyard. We are the employees in His giant 'vineyard'; so as long as we are doing His work, we are permitted to partake of and enjoy His product, the world around us. Still we must remember not to be a Chazer - don't overindulge. Instead, we must work hard and stay honest and eventually move up in the job. And who knows, maybe one day, you'll make partner!

Which, by the way, is the goal of Judaism; G-d created the world. It is now every Jew's mission to make himself G-d's partner.